

The customer is (almost) always right

Automation customers sometimes need help from their suppliers to know what options are available to solve their problems. Those options are not always obvious, says Gambica's deputy director, Steve Brambley*.

There is a well-known phrase in business – The customer is always right – which, like almost all well-known sayings, has a counter-argument. While it may well be a good principle to not disagree with your customer on the basis of winning repeat business, they can always benefit from a little education.

If you are in the business of providing automation technology and solutions, then the customer may not know what they want, what the best solution is or what is possible to achieve.

As Henry Ford is purported to have said: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses". While the customer may always be right, they might need some help from the supplier to know what else is possible.

In the case of automation vendors, the customer probably recognises this and is not just looking for a product, but looking for advice on best practice and the different options available. However, this scenario assumes that the customer has already decided that automation is the solution.

Usually the customer starts with a need – a problem to solve or a goal to achieve. It could be to improve productivity, flexibility, accuracy, efficiency or one of many other objectives that arise in business.

If we take a further step back, the customer may not be looking for automation *per se*, but is buying a machine, a process or some infrastructure.

A manufacturing business will ultimately aim to be competitive, but may not be aware that automation is a route to achieving this.

This applies equally to concepts like Industry 4.0. Is the customer aware of the benefits of integrated, connected, autonomous systems? Are they asking for that, or just faster horses? And if they stick with faster horses, will someone else come along with a Formula One racing car?

I attended an industrial automation conference recently and the theme throughout was Industry 4.0, exploring the possibilities for manufacturing in 20 to 30 years' time. During the event, an interesting question was posed: Could manufacturing be disrupted in the same way that the telecommunications, entertainment, retail and media industries have been by the development in information technology?

An example of such disruptive technology is additive manufacturing, sometimes referred to as 3-D printing. Imagine printing your own spare parts for a machine or downloading a file to print a tool you need. Is this an opportunity for entrepreneurial SMEs to bring a different business model to market?

In the recent past, supermarket chains were in an arms race to build more stores than their competitors. There was a land-grab to build large outlets on the outskirts of towns and cities with ample parking and the widest possible stock of products lined up on the shelves. The rise of on-line shopping with delivery to your door at a specific time-slot has disrupted this business model completely and supermarkets are facing a huge change and non-traditional competition.

In the same way that Amazon didn't have physical bookshops when it started, and Ocado didn't have physical grocery shops, could a start-up break into manufacturing and become a new household name?

The trick for any manufacturing business wanting to stay competitive is to know that even if they think they just need faster horses, there may be flying cars, hoverboards and jet-packs available. ■

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